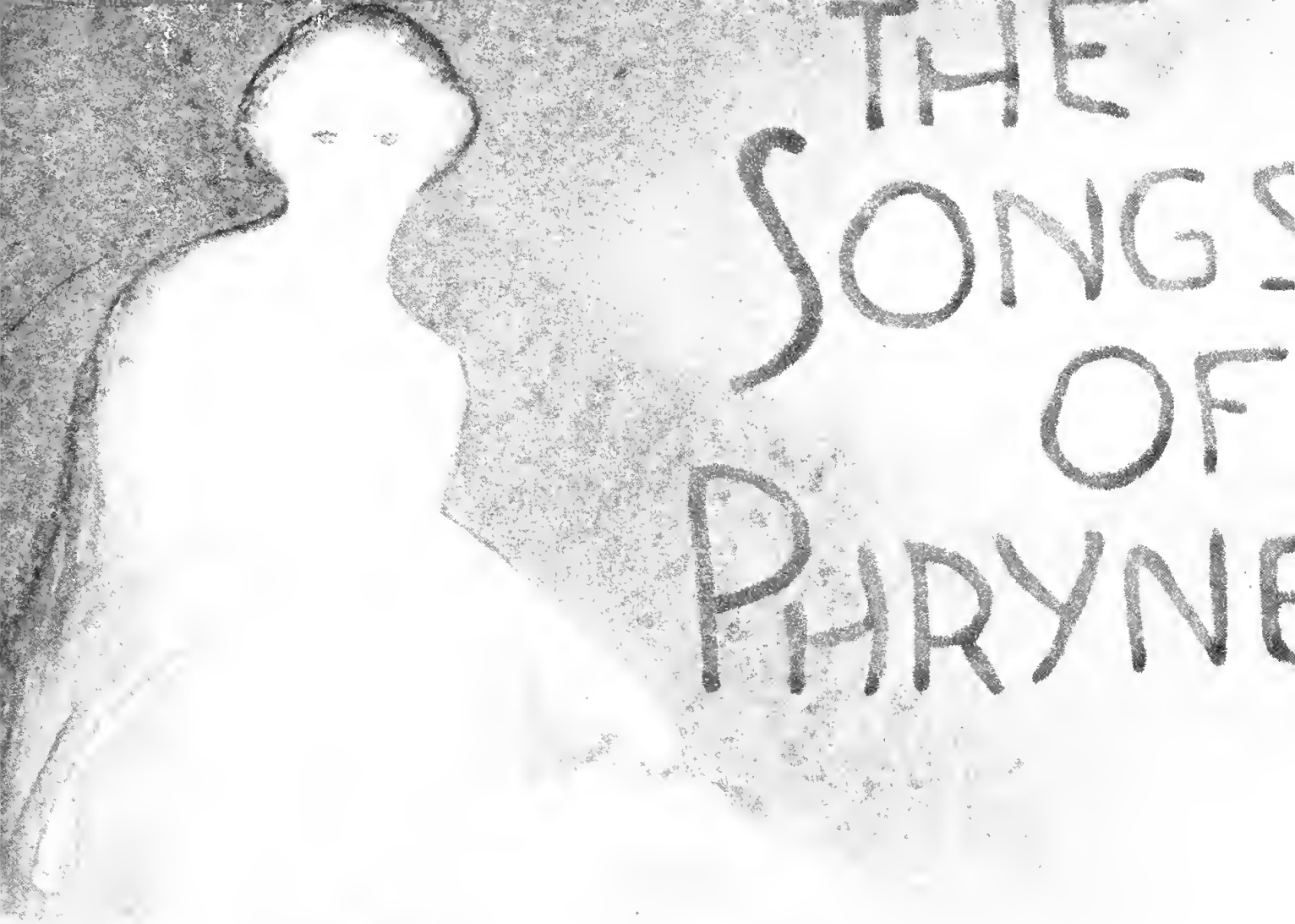
THE
SONGS
OF
PHRYNE

THE SONGS OF PHRYNE.

By the Same Author:

EPHEMERA. Greek Prose Poems (*in English*).

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Mitchell S. Buck

The Songs of Phryne

PHILADELPHIA
NICHOLAS L. BROWN
MCMXVII

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Phryne lived in the fourth century B. C. She was so beautiful that she has never been forgotten.

I

NAIADS, raise your pale faces through the shadowy water. I have come to show you something; I have come to bathe among you.

See: I am almost a woman; I am no longer a child. Soon all my dreams will come true...How long have I gathered and stored away, like a bee, all my love! But how uncouth the shepherds; how sharp the eyes of men upon the streets! Would that I might find, with you, Naiads, a lover with great, soft eyes, among the dim forest creatures!

Raise your faces, Naiads, through the shadowy water. It is I—Phryne. I have come to show you something. See: I have come to bathe among you.

II

STAR OF THE NIGHT, soft spreading out thy radiance, where has my lover gone? canst thou not find him? Deep shadow of the trees, does thy depth hide him? Silvery meadow, do his wandering feet press thy flowers? White roadway, hast thou led him away, toward the purple hills?

How distant the hour when first I saw him: that hour when I passed him, blushing and with faltering step! Why did he not speak?... Perhaps he thought I was a child ...Three days have dragged

away; I have lived in the market-place; I have wandered in the fields; but nowhere have I found him.

Star of the Night, tell me: where has my lover gone. Search thou for me, since all the world spreads out before thee. If thou findest him, tell him of my longing and of my nights untouched with sleep—and forget thou not to say that I am fair.

III

WHEN the sun burns like a red disc in the western sky and the shadows lengthen across the meadows, far on the hill-slopes Cleon sounds his pipes and I see the distant sheep slowly gather to the fold. Soon the world grows very still. Only a red glow marks the cooling path of the sun; the trees lose their shadows; a slow mist rises over the fields.

Night full of terrors and joys: night pale beneath the stars or bright with moonlight: thy voice calls to me over the drowsing

world and thy vague promise whispers among the trees. I grow afraid with an unknown fear and warm with an unknown longing, so languorous is the fall of thy purple mantle, so mysterious the stirrings which thou shelterest, so murmurous the brooding of the shadowed earth.

IV

THOU art a pretty girl; too pretty to be selling capers for a few oboli. What is thy charming name?—What matters my name? If thou wilt buy, say what thou wishest; if not, I will pass on.—I will buy...thyself. Wilt thou sell?—I do not love; I have no lovers. Thou art a stranger here.—So pretty! Is it possible! How old art thou?—I am a woman. Women do not tell their age.

—Of course. My name is Archias and I am from Thebes. Thou hast heard of Thebes? Enter here. I

will treat thee gently. Thou art a pretty girl; thou art a very pretty girl. I will give thee a golden stater.—I could have had one long since . . . many times . . . What a lovely basin!. . . Give me three and I remain.—Slaves, close the doors!

—Hymenaeus! O Hymenaeus!—I love thee; I will stay with thee until thou sendest me away.—Ah, child! if thou wouldst! How many such sweet vows of the night have paled with the Star of Morning!. . .

V

SPRING is the time of warmth and life, when a vague movement stirs deep within the earth and all the flowers raise their bright faces toward the sun. And my face, also, embellished by thy love, lifts itself, like a flower, toward the sun of thine eyes.

VI

AND thou wilt come from Thebes to see me? Thou wilt not forget?—Forget thee, child!...But alas! for how short a time will I, alone, have memories!

VII

THESPIAE, which gave me birth: Thespiae, dwelling of Semele: proud Thespiae, too proud to give the great Persian even his water and earth: I leave thee. Fields, rich with harvests: clear springs and pools: soft-rolling hills: I leave you all.

Far beyond the slopes of Kithaeron, to the south, I go—to Athens, which men call the violet-crowned. With my flutes slung upon my shoulder, with my girdle not too tightly bound, I go, perhaps never to return.

Goddess—thou who watchest over poor girls—grant that men may be pleased with my fairness; if I serve thee truly, grant that I may be happy, and that love may, some day, bury me, like another Danae, in another flood of gold.

VIII

MEN of Athens: pass me by: see me not. Good! I am only a flute-player. There are many such, are there not?... There are none like me! Wait! In a month, ten men shall know my name; in two months, forty men; in three months, two hundred!

Poets: to you I will teach a new song; to painters, a new beauty; to philosophers, a new philosophy. I will defy you; I will correct your verses; I will condemn your colors; I will overthrow

your laws!...I, Phryne of Thespiae, speak!

Yes, I will play the flutes at your festivals for a drachma. But no man shall touch me for a drachma, nor for two, nor six. He who loves me shall give me gold —he shall give me gold, even for the least warm glance of mine eyes!

It is I, Phryne of Thespiae, speaking...And I am afraid.—I am afraid of your city, of its streets, its houses, its vast, cold temples. I am afraid and I am alone and I hate you...But I will conquer you all, I will conquer you all;

and, for every tear you bring to mine eyes, you shall pay a thousandfold with unpierced pearls!

IX

SLENDER reeds, companions of my labors: when I breathe into you, limpid notes flow out; when I sigh, you moan with a thousand sorrows; when I blow, you shrill with sudden clamor.

To your gentler notes, Nicippe, my friend, sings the lovely verse of Sappho; to your swinging rhythms, the feet of the dancers poise and beat upon the floor; to your shrilling, the women shudder and the spirit of shaggy Pan flashes in the eyes of men.

Slender reeds, companions of my labors, never will the choicest

wines seem sweeter to me than the kiss of your waxen lips; never will the ardor of men warm me as your swift response; never will the smoothest silks receive from my hands the caresses I lavish upon your shining, polished slenderness.

X

SINCE I have no precious jewels, I will wear none at all, not even my comb of ivory. Since I have no soft, rare vestments, I will wear, simply, a white robe, without clasps or borders, and the folds of it shall fall about mine ankles. Since I have no fan, I will bear in my hands only the soft caresses of my love and the watchful vengeance of my polished nails.

Thus ready, I will appear upon the streets. He who desires me, I will refuse. I will refuse all. They will follow me and supplicate; to-

morrow they will return and offer me, not silver, but gold.

For I am beautiful, even naked and without jewels. Already I have seen it in the eyes of men; and the lips of men have told me. Some day, I will sit in the theatre, clad in broidered vestments, laden with jewels, and surrounded by my slaves. All men shall desire me. The rulers of men shall lay their treasures at my feet.

XI

PROUD philosopher, thou passest with a quick step, thine eyes upon the ground, thy brows wrinkled and scowling. Thou seest me not, perhaps. Seest thou not, philosopher?

Stand thou upon the Poecile among thy followers. Declaim thy theses in purest Attic... Thinkest thou to teach of the soul, thou to whom even life is closed? Thy books, tightly clutched in thine arms—what do they teach thee, these foolish books? Do they teach thee that

life speeds; that the golden hours will soon be past?

Men whisper strange things of thee; thou hast enemies whose tongues are never idle. He whose wife openly loves elsewhere, who is never seen with the courtesans, whose only praises are heard when he visits the palaestra...

Art thou, then, so virtuous? Truly, thou art a paragon, with thy disordered cloak and staring eyes! And a young girl speaks, from her threshold, greater words of wisdom than thine own... How thou glarest at me! Pass on, then. The fault is mine if still I imagined thee a man.

XII

I AM a Greek. In my limbs, the blood of heroes flows. I am the child of holy mountains and of flowering fields; within my body dwells one spark of a mighty spirit. Thou, thou art a Roman from a barbarous land; thou art dusky and strange; thou hast proud, cold eyes...To the Greeks, I give myself, and they adore me. Thou, who art not a Greek, aspirest far.

—Yet thou wilt love me with all thy love. Thou wilt pour the wine into my wine-cup; thou wilt dazzle even my—barbarian—eyes

with thy beauty; thou wilt sing to me, in the moonlight, the songs of Sappho and, in the heavy dark, the whispered songs of Astyanassa...For these complaisances, I will give thee all the gold thou canst hold in thy two hollowed hands and a jewel like moonlight on the waters to wear at thy soft-curved throat. I am indeed proud —those I love are not indifferently rewarded, and are not forgotten.

—Thou art handsome. If thou wouldst conquer, then, for this time, Phryne of Thespiae yields to Rome. Guard thou that conquest bring thee not disaster.

XIII

GODDESS born of the sea, eternal, multiform: Phryne consecrates to thee this girdle which, like thine, enfolds all in the flames of desire. She consecrates to thee also this yellow veil, in memory of those days when she had no veils; and these ten staters in memory of those days when she had no gold.

Grant thou, O goddess, that she may have vestments still more gorgeous and lovers still wealthier; that she may reveal to men some semblance, however slight,

of thine own glory; that she may become, of all thy votaries, the most desired and the best beloved.

XIV

TO Lysos, son of Themistocles: Thou weepest continually at my door, before the astonished eyes of passers-by, complaining that I will not receive thee; that I have no regard for love.

Remember: once I admitted thee and thou didst offer me showers of tears and a few drachmae... Wouldst thou have me in rags upon a pallet of straw? Thou art young and foolish. Seek some flute-player, not an hetaera, and annoy me no longer.

XV

WHAT eyes! like caverns! and over night! By the two goddesses! Nossis, the cosmetics, quickly! Wait! See what thy coaxing hands may do ...That cursed Dorian! I might have expected this. He must have been born in a forest among the wolves and spent all his life in the palaestra. I thought he would never sleep!

It is a difficult life, trying to please all men! These of Athens may be more exacting, but refinement quickens their pleasures, even the most unusual...I will

receive no more ruffians, no more aspirants to the club of Herakles, great-handed satyrs . . . Nossis, take notice; I swear this by the Kyprian . . . By the way, carry for me, to the temple, to-day, a tenth of this man's gold; and forget not to make a wish before the statue.

XVI

SWEET, shadowed stream, babbling upon thy way: would that I might bathe in thee, that I might give my body to thy caress cool from the mountain woodlands.

But I dare not; even in solitary places there are spying eyes. What huntsman, what wandering shepherd, might, in passing, gaze like another Actaeon—beholding only a less vengeful goddess—and tell, that night, above the wine-cups, what he had seen, unknown and unreproved?

I, who go not even with women to the public baths—shall I be seen with impunity, naked in some forest glade?...Ah! years ago, how little I would have cared!

Clear stream, farewell. Not this day shall thine eager waters creep over my perfumed limbs. I am from the city and—almost—I have forgotten...Seek on thy way some sun-browned shepherdess, her flesh dusty, her lips still moist with the milk of goats. More happily wilt thou touch her, since she is more a part of thee—a part of the blue sky overhead. ...Slaves, move on!

XVII

HERE, where mighty Kithaeron uprears its sacred bulk, the sunlight sparkles through the cool air, the pines diffuse their spicy perfume and, on the trellises, the purple grapes hang in thick clusters, awaiting the vintner's hand.

Great Dionysos, immortal, this fair land is worthy, even of thee. Here dost thou lavish thy gifts upon men—thou and holy Demeter who breathes in the soft rustle of the golden grain. And here the earth has built for thee a temple, mighty through the ages,

greater far than any temple formed by human hands.

Through the sunlight, the voice of the syrinx blends with the songs of harvest. The still night whispers the silent message of thy presence... Thus would I find thee; thus would I know thee, in silence, like some strange dream. Yet—when the silence of thy worship is shattered by a thousand Maenads, by flaring torches and the clash of cymbals, I would revel with thee also, foam-flecked and panting, and splash the columns of thy sanctuary with my seething, maddened blood.

XVIII

IN all Hellas, who has not heard my name? How many, whom I have never seen, have spoken of my love? And now, in one day, have twenty thousand men beheld me.

Before all these pious pilgrims, upon the strands of Eleusis, I walked slowly and alone to the water's edge. Those who first saw me, gazed; my name flew from lip to lip.

Across the sparkling waters, lay Salamis, faintly blue; above, through the clear air, shone the bright sun of Attica; at my feet,

the little waves lapped upon the sand...I dropped my robes and stood naked, without a jewel, without a veil, and gave my body to the clear waters...

I — Phryne — before all eyes, bathed in the open sea. And when I came forth from the waters, a great sigh swept over all that multitude...Ah! did I not say that I was beautiful!

XIX

I WOULD paint thee, I would limn thee in the purest colors, as I saw thee that day upon the borders of the sea. Like a goddess thou didst face the waters and the sky; the waves rippled about thy thighs...Where was Poseidon, on that day, at his own festival? By what divine repression wert thou not ravished from us like another Amymone?

Like a goddess thou camest up from the waves, wringing the reluctant water from thine hair golden as the sunlight, the sea-foam still upon thee, the water-

drops glowing like pearls upon thy shoulders—thou the Pearl-Born and Immortal.

I would paint thee as I saw thee, naked and perfect and beautiful. In all the world, there is no one so beautiful as thou. And I would set thee up that all might see, as those of Eleusis, favored above all.

Thou art fair beyond all dreams; and I, Apelles, am skilful. One hour, each day, for a few days; one hour from thy sleep or from thy toilette—and I will show thee thyself, as in a mirror, born of the smiling waters—Aphrodite Anadyomene!

XX

PHRYNE to Nicippe. Greeting:

My dear: I hasten to tell thee that I am free. Thou wilt be delighted. And Euthias is in disgrace; they say he is in despair. But what could he expect? Lovers should never grow angry; when they do, they are lost...It is true I refused him twice; thou knowest, my dear, I choose my lovers, not they me. Yet, thus to accuse me; to even have me summoned before the Areopagos—and for impiety! That was serious; I might have been executed!

Be assured, I shall reward Hyperides handsomely... Well, they took me before the judges. Imagine the crimes with which Euthias charged me! I had profaned the Eleusinian Mysteries! I had raised up strange gods! I had instituted unlawful and secret rites! ...Thou knowest, my dear, to what extent my mysteries go. Even the strangest is sanctioned by custom, here at Athens; and, tell me, are there any strange gods or new mysteries?...The Heliasts were much impressed. But when Euthias could think of no more crimes with which to charge me, my Hyperides pleaded

so well that I lost fear with every word. Then, at the climax of his plea, did he not seize my vestment and tear it away, almost to my girdle, displaying me before the whole court!...Of course, my dear, the Heliasts' eyes fairly devoured me; and after that Euthias was quite impotent.

They acquitted me. Half the court, and a great crowd of the people, bore me to the temple of Aphrodite...I suppose there will be a scandal. But this is of little enough importance since, it seems, I am not without certain powers. In any case, I am not only free; I am doubly famous.

XXI

HE sent for me—he, Praxiteles, beneath whose hand the cold stone stirs into life. This pleased me; and it pleased me also to go afoot to his dwelling, without attendants and without slaves, alone like a little poor girl who has only her beauty and her silent desires.

When first I stood before him and dropped the veils from my body, his lips moved and his hands trembled. His graver cut wickedly into the marble; twice, the hammer fell from his hand. Desire overwhelmed him like a wave

—I saw it—and his eyes besought me wildly. But I gave no sign.

Each day, for many days, I stood there while he worked. Each day his longings deepened. But his hand became strong and sure, always revealing new contours, new perfections; and Desire, no less than Beauty, leapt from the marble.

Then, at last, one day, he told me all was finished. And on that day, I stepped down from my pedestal—and the goddess he had graven from the stone gave herself, living, to his arms...If ever

thou seest that marble, thou wilt understand — thou wilt understand why I waited.

XXII

BEAUTIFUL one, thou art a goddess with eyes bright as the flashing sea and hair more dazzling than the golden sun. Thy lips are gently curved and provoking as the lips of Eros; thy breasts mould the perfection of inverted cups; the slow movement of thy supple thighs surpasses grace itself.

What divine touch caressed thee, thus to unite in a single body all the perfection and all the dreams of gods and men? What immortal breath aspired upon thee, thus to illume with such warmth and

life the snowy splendor of thy limbs?

I will form of thee a statue of pure gold upon a pedestal of polished marble. I will set it up in a sacred place. I will set it up for all men to see, even among the Delphian Immortals, between the statues of great kings, in the dwelling place of a god. And there I will worship it—I who have loved thee—I the humblest and the happiest of thy slaves.

XXIII

HAIL! Goddess: Aphrodite! Phryne, thy votaress, salutes thee—Phryne, thy votaress, clad in colors of her own choosing, shod with golden sandals and burdened with the weight of many jewels.

Goddess: we have many secrets, thou and I. Alone, we may smile, a little. Since all others would be mad, we, we at least, thou and I, will remain sober. Thou knowest I have no illusions...

O Cytheraea! how thy smile has drawn me! Lo, I am the mistress of a whole nation!

XXIV

SLAVES, fill the lamps with perfumed oil, and trim the wicks, for my lover comes, this night. Spread the couches with silks of rarest purple; set forth cups of crystal, cups of gold; strew the threshold of my house with roses for, this night, my lover comes to me.

Skilfully wind my hair, pierce it with golden pins and bind it with a ribbon of pure gold. Cover all my body with sweet ointments, darken mine eyes with fard, and polish each pink nail with the powder of roses. Then clothe me

in the softest, finest linen and gird me with the cestus of all desire.

I hear a foot-fall, a sigh before my door...Hasten, slaves! light still more lamps, lest my lover miss his way. Open wide the door lest he chance to pass me by. Stand upon the threshold among the roses and, when you see him, call to him; bid him enter, quickly; tell him that Phryne waits, and bid him hasten...

XXV

FRIEND, when thou goest to Thespiae, ask the citizens to show thee their city's greatest treasure. They will lead thee to a temple and show thee the statue of a god. It is the statue of Eros—Eros, the god of love.

Thou wilt find it beautiful. It is beautiful as the love from whence it came. Praxiteles wrought it—for me—for Phryne. For, he said, it was the image of my son—Eros, born of the goddess.

It stands in my native city where all may see, in remembrance of

delight surpassing all desire, and happiness beyond all human dreams. It shows, also, that Phryne does not forget...An immortal, we gave it birth, we who also are immortal—I for the beauty I revealed and he, Praxiteles, for the beauty set up before all future ages, graven in the stone.

XXVI

EACH springtime, the trees, bare of the autumn past, bring forth new leaves; the streams shake off their icy bonds; the earth stirs into life. And each springtime, thine image, O Pearl-Born, brightens in the hearts of men. Ah! why, of all these things, must I, alone, perish? Why can my springtime, once past, return no more?

Yet—if my springtime passes, if my summer blows full, let me be clad in gold and scarlet and let my couch be strewn with roses. Hide only, with thy radiance,

Persephone's wan smile—diffuse with thy dripping perfumes the slow fragrance stealing from distant fields of asphodel. And the sound of my clashing bracelets, the call of flutes and citherns and the songs of my lovers shall rise to thee like a vast hymn of praises without end.

XXVII

ARCHIAS, thou art still handsome. What a pity thou art not an Athenian! I have learned to love the Athenians—and they me.

But of thy city, thou talkest to suffocation. Hast thou not heard what happened to me there?...

I sent a message to the citizens of that city. I, Phryne, once a Boeotian, offered to rebuild with Athenian gold those walls of Thebes, famous in song; to restore the seven gates of the city of Cadmus. All I asked, as a memorial, was

that, upon the new walls, there be inscribed these words: What the great Alexander destroyed, Phryne restores.

I would have beggared myself; but the citizens were too proud—they refused the gift and their city still lies defenseless...Archias, thine eyes are clear; thou and I, we come from the same race and we are no longer children. Remain thou here in Athens, where the walls are strong, and I will buy for thee whatever house thou mayest choose, for thy dwelling.

XXVIII

NICIPPE is dead. We have borne her to the tomb, at night, guided by flaring torches. We have poured upon her stela oil and perfumes and our tears.

Now she lies alone with her flasks, her perfume vials and her treasures, holding in her still hands the mirror of bronze which once reflected her bright eyes and smiling lips, veiled in the dark waves of her hair where once the hands of lovers strayed.

Ototoi! But a few days since, she was like us, living and warm.

Soon, perhaps, we will be as she is now. Other hands, unknown, will lay us in our tomb and, with the passing days, the memory of our love will fade, melting among the slow dreams of distant years.

XXIX

AUTUMN!...Somewhere, in the north, the bright-hued leaves fall gently from the trees and cover the forest paths; the slow contours of the hills rise more sharply against the sky; the night air grows chill...

Thespiae: when the summer dies, the heart of Phryne stirs with memories of thee, with vague regrets. So many years ago I left thee!...Will I never see again thy houses and temples, the bright flowers of thy pasture lands, thy brooks and groves? Will I never hear again the well-remembered

voices of those, so fortunate, who have never left thee? Or are they dead, those people, and thy temples fallen, thy brooks rocky and dry?

Gone are all thy dryads; the nymphs of thy woods and fields, the naiads of thy springs, have forgotten me, long since...Thespiae!...How the leaves rustle in the wind...

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